

Ref. Draft Manuscript, p. 99, beginning para 2, through p. 101,
para 2: (underlined portions refer to manuscript)

On 17 August, 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines (minus H Company left behind at Dong Ha-
did 1/4 relieve 2/4 at Dong Ha before or after 23 Aug.?) encountered stiff resistance
from NVA in two concrete bunkers overlooking a ford along Route 9. After suffering
18 casualties, including a platoon leader (memory - Captain Besch), two M48 tanks
were called from Dong Ha to destroy the bunkers with their 90mm guns. The 2nd Batta-
lion continued on, as NVA soldiers were occasionally observed at a distance.

Establishing his battalion CP on a mountain NE of the Rockpile, Lieutenant Col-
onel Bench directed his three compaines to fan out and reconnoiter prominent terrain
features 500 to 1000 meters to the NW, N, and NE.

At noon on the 21st, E. Company, commanded by Captain Edwin W. Besch, who had
replaced wounded Captain Lee as company commander a week earlier, was ordered to
reconnoiter a wooded ridge 250 meters NE of his position. Due to recent casualites
and rotations, Company E now consisted of 3 officers and 91 enlisted Marines, reorgan-
ized into 2 rifle platoons of 2 squads each, plus attachments. One platoon remained
as a base of fire while the other was divided. One squad, under SSGT Frye, recon-
noitered a nearby hill which overlooked the route of the other squad, led by his
platoon Sgt. SSGT Frye observed two concrete bunkers on the objective and reconnoit-
ered by fire with rifles, machineguns, and M79 grenades, Observing no sign of the
enemy, the squad advanced in skirmishline to within 15 yds of the bunkers before being
fired upon by two 12.7mm MGs in the bunkers and a 7.62mm MG from each flank, and 60mm
mortar rds impacted shortly after. SSGT Frye almost immediately reported 2 MGs and
"many, many" voices on the reverse slope of his hill, SSGT Frye, PFC Boone, PFC Bray
over-ran the machine gun bunker, capturing two 12.7mm MGs and 32 hand grenades. One
VC was killed by SSGT Frye approximatley 15 yards away. Total marine casualties were
2 killed, 15 wounded. By using successive air strikes from F4s, A4s, and armed UH1Es;
155mm artillery, 106mm recoilless rifle, and 81mm mortar fire; and all company weapons,

Company E covered the withdrawal and evacuation of wounded from in front of the bunkers, forced the NVA 82mm mortars to displace twice, destroyed the bunkers, dispersed the other enemy force, and inflicted casualties of 11 enemy KIA (confirmed) and 20 "probables. A notable instance of "silent" ground-air coordination occurred when an NVA 12.7mm anti-aircraft MG fired on a Marine A4 passing low overhead. SSGT Frye directed a 3.5" WP rd to mark the enemy position. Before the Forward Air Controller could radio the next A4, the pilot released his bombs on target, probably destroying the gun and crew. Toward dusk, an NVA 82mm recoilless gun was silenced by 155mm artillery fire after firing two rds at E Company. Based on the extensive NVA contacts with elements of at least a battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Bench requested a B-52 strike on the valley behind the enemy positions the next morning.

These encounters, however, were merely preliminaries to heavier action during August 23-26, when Marines fought the 803rd NVA Regiment for a ridgeline called the Razorback, located 1000 meters NW of the Rockpile, and which was honeycombed with caves, many of them dug out by the Japanese during World War II. The action resulted from an enemy threat to the 11 man Marine outpost on the Rockpile. The sheer cliffs of the 700 foot harsh outcropping prevented resupply of the Marine outpost except by helicopter. Even then, helicopter pilots had to perform the demanding maneuver of balancing one wheel of their craft on the edge of the Rockpile while hovering until the cargo could be unloaded.⁹ By 21 August, a battalion of the 803rd NVA Regiment had occupied the Razorback and trained 12.7mm machine guns and mortars on the Rockpile. On 21 and 22 August, enemy gunners on the Razorback opened fire on resupply helicopters, causing them to abort. On the 22nd an enemy force scaled the sheer cliffs in an unsuccessful attempt to assault the Marine outpost; at least one NVA soldier was knocked into space by exploding M79 grenades (observed by E Company XO through binoculars 1500 meters away). Air strikes on the evening of the 22nd were directed against the NVA anti aircraft position at the SE base of the Razorback.

During the morning of 23 August, Lieutenant Colonel Bench was tasked with securing the Razorback and relieving the harassed Marines on the Rockpile. By this time, Bench's battalion had consolidated in the mixed grassy and jungle, mountainous terrain between the Rockpile and Nui Cay Tre Ridgeline, close to where the 8-9 August action had occurred. Upon receipt of his new mission, Bench (the understrength battalion had consolidated in a perimeter and needed no "turning around," as indicated in the text) ordered Company E, now reduced to 3 officers and 54 enlisted Marines, to reconnoiter the SE portion of the Razorback, 3000 meters to the SW; to find the destroyed enemy anti aircraft gun if possible, and to return to the battalion perimeter by dusk. (My memory about this point, which contradicts the "assault" version of the draft, is backed up by my initial establishment of a base of fire with my XO, one squad, and a 106mm recoilless rifle flown in by helicopter, about 250 meters from the objective; my sending a squad patrol with Lt. Sharratt to the rear base about 1530; and Lt. Col. Bench's ordering the recovery of the 106mm RR by helicopter, which occurred at about 1715, shortly before contact was made with the NVA. Had I been ordered to "assault" the ponderous Razorback with my 4 understrength squads, I would have seized occupied and been prepared to defend a suitable high point with my entire company by 1730, rather than being at the base of the mountain, with the company still divided.

Reaching the vicinity of the Razorback by early afternoon, Captain Besch left his executive officer, 2nd Lt. Mowry, with one squad and the 60mm mortar, which were reinforced by a 106mm recoilless rifle landed by helicopter, about 250 meters from the Razorback and led the remaining three squads and headquarters personnel through the thick jungle terrain toward the objective. Company E searched one huge cave and several smaller ones without finding signs of the enemy. Some cave passageways were large enough to drive 2 trucks through, side by side (according to Captain Besch and several Marines). About 1630, Captain Besch detached 2nd Lt. Sharratt and/or Forward Air Controller with a squad patrol to search the low ground for the anti aircraft gun, but they returned to the company rear position without finding any sign of

the enemy. The remaining forward elements of E Company, formed on a low finger of the Razorback, prepared to withdraw as a helicopter (ordered by battalion) picked up their covering 106mm recoilless rifle at 1715. Shortly after, two Marines found a North Vietnamese poncho with some bloody bandages, just as two grenades rolled out of a nearby cave. Lieutenant Colonel Bench then ordered Captain Besch to capture some prisoners, if possible, and Captain Besch directed on of his two remaining squads, with all the available hand grenades, to close on the cave. SSGT Frye and two other Marines approached the mouth of the cave Captain Besch and SSGT Frye who replied, "Sir, that's all there are!" Captain Besch (using a Leatherneck "Fire Team Phrase Book") then called out in Vietnamese: "Doctor, medical help, come out." Three shots, evidently a signal, were fired inside the cave. Within seconds, squads of NVA soldiers (at least 2 platoons) simultaneously erupted from 5 or 6 concealed caves in the craggy rock wall and immediately shot down the surprised Marine squad near the cave. An enemy platoon about 40 meters away on the left flank. Captain Besch jumped into a bomb crater as a machine gun burst from above straddled him, only to find his company radio operator, who had been behind him, dying from a burst through the chest. Both his radio operators were mortally wounded; two of the three E Company machine gunners (there were no crews left) present were killed or wounded; the third (name unknown), but I heard he was recommended for a Silver Star) fired all of his ammunition before succumbing to 8 wounds from loss of blood. Inside the bomb crater, Captain Besch realized the situation was desperate. SSGT Frye took the headset from PFC Pollock, his dying radio operator, to order 2nd Lt. Mowyer's rear element to fire on the enemy in the rocks, above as enemy bullets continued to follow him inside the crater. He reasoned that close air support would not be immediately available, and artillery fire might kill or would more Marines than the enemy, estimated at between 100 and 150 (2 platoons in front, 1 above, and 1 on the flank), who were mostly protected by the overhanging rocks. Every seconds counted as the enemy, only a few meters in front, formed for an assault. SSGT Frye decided to resist with his few remaining Marines so

that the wounded could crawl into the thick undergrowth and evade the enemy, then let the surviving Marines withdraw while he fought to the death in place (too proud of his company and being a Christian, an American, and a Marine to leave while the bodies of his Marines remained behind - these were his thoughts at that time), but subsequent events dictated otherwise. (After completing his radio call for help,) SSGT Frye, noted that the enemy soldiers in front, flank, and above maintained an incessant chatter, reminding him of "monkey island" in the old Milwaukee Zoo, but that only one determined looking NVA, whose head and pointing were visible in a small cave about 15 yds above him was shouting commands. SSGT Frye steadied his pistol on the edge of the bomb crater and fired, killing the NVA commander instantly, which seemingly disorganized and silenced the NVA soldiers, who continued firing, SSGT Frye emptied his pistol twice into the nearest NVA squad emerging from a cave entrance, Captain Besch was using the corpsman's ammo when an NVA soldier wounded him in the lower arm and armpit, knocking his pistol away. (The corpsman suggested he crawl out of the crater to get out of the intense enemy fire, which he did.) Captain Besch joined the wounded corpsman and five Marines; the platoon commander (SSGT Frye), the platoon radio operator, an M79 grenadier whose grenades had been lost in the scurry for cover and two riflemen (one in shock, who huddled behind boulders blown up from the bomb crater), as intense enemy fire continued. Captain Besch called the other Marines behind by name, exhorting them to continue firing. After the second time around, no one answered. Then, 3 enemy grenades exploded among the Marines and corpsman behind the boulders. Realizing that only one rifleman and the platoon commander/SSGT Frye could still fire their weapons, and hoping the the enemy would believe their grenades had killed them, Captain Besch ordered the 5 Marines and corpsman to "play dead", as the enemy moved closer. Corporal Paul M. Reed, (whom Captain Besch thought was dead), the battalion radio operator, told the battalion commander that the North Vietnamese were "real close and closing on their flanks, still throwing grenades and firing automatic weapons

One NVA soldier stood a few feet away, and fired burst at Captain Besch's head and stomach, but missed! One burst hit the corpsman's legs, (he was holding Captain Besch's armpit to control bleeding) an inch from Captain Besch's chin; the other grazed Captain Besch's stomach. Some of the NVA soldiers continued on the Company E's rear position 250 meters away, but failed to attack, while most of the others remained near the cave entrances, opened their mess kits, and ate supper. After the nearest enemy had passed SSGT Frye led the group of survivors in prayer, then ordered them to "fight to the death, if the enemy comes back and disturbs us." He noted that the natural color and a measure of confidence returned to their faces, and the corpsman administered morphine shots, despite his wounds. Sporadic contact was maintained through the night. SSGT Frye fought hand to hand to protect his radio man PFC Pollock. SSGT Frye shot one NVA point blank and received grenade shrapnel in his head and knife wounds in his hand. Lieutenant Colonel Bench^{hand} requested air support and sent a platoon from Company C to assist Company E, which was not reduced to Lt. Sharratt's 2 squads and a 60mm mortar - about 2 dozen effectives - commanded by 2nd LT. Mowry, the Executive Officer, located 250 meters from the Razorback; and about 17 scattered, mostly wounded, survivors with Captain Besch. Fixed-wing aircraft from MAGs-11 and 12 arrived on station at 1755 (by then Captain Besch's survivors were playing "dead"), but could not strike the Razorback for fear of causing Marine casualties. Instead, they bombed a valley to the west which the North Vietnamese were using as a route to flank the Marine positions. Twenty-five minutes later, two VMO-2 UH-1E gunships arrived and strafed the enemy (Where? at about this time, two bombs or 155mm rds impacted about 50 meters behind us. SSGT Frye brushed hot fragment of my back, but not before they burned me slightly.) At the same time, the platoon from Company G joined (by helicopter?) the rear element of Company E.

Ref: para 2, P. 100: "In spite of the assistance, the forward elements of Company E remained under heavy pressure" hardly described the situation: Company E survivors had been overrun and were only escaping certain death or capture by feigning

death or lying in concealment! "shortly after the air strikes, communications were lost" - is incorrect. (Corporal Reed and my group of survivors maintained radio contact with battalion (on separate frequencies, I believe) until he died and we were rescued, each believing that the other had been killed in the initial firefight.) At this time, the battalion commander decided to send a platoon from Company F into the fight. Helicopters from MAG-16 supplied the relief column with two 106mm recoilless rifles, flamethrowers, and caliber .50 machine guns (Corporal Reed was aware of this; but Captain Besch did not personally man the platoon radio. SSGT Frye directed a 106mm fire on the cliff to keep the NVA from coming down off of it. The battalion S-3, Captain John J. "Jack" Hilgers, arrived and took command of the composite relief group. As his troops tried to link up with Company E's forward elements, Hilger's men were stopped by heavy enemy fire. (I don't know when or where they encountered "heavy enemy fire"; but the lead platoon was driven off by grenades (only) thrown from in front of the caves over the Company E survivor's heads at about 0100; according to SSGT Frye, the platoon commander Lt. Snyder was wounded.

With the coming of night, the Marines brought their entire arsenal into the conflict (battle?). Aircraft and artillery at Com Lo pounded enemy positions and provided illumination. At 2045, a US Air Force AC-47 opened up with 7.62mm miniguns on enemy bunkers (on the central and northern parts of the Razorback?) Corporal Reed, the Company E battalion radio operator, who had been wounded (in the back, arm, and leg according to SSGT Frye and was separated from Captain Besch's 6 survivors, was in communication with the relief group and came back on the air and told Captain Hilgers that they were still holding out against the North Vietnamese. In response to the rescue attempt the NVA then brought out a 12.7mm machine gun and set it up only a few feet away from Corporal Reed. SSGT Frye was in the line of fire between the MG and the relief force. He considered taking his pistol and trying to sneak up to the gun and shoot the crew, but decided to wait and see if the relief force, which probably had

LAWs, could not destroy it, who directed Marine 106mm recoilless rifle fire against it (virtually calling fire in on himself!). The third shot destroyed the enemy machinegun and crew (pieces of the gun were blown all over the mountainside; the 4-5 man crew were all killed, as I heard no further sound from the, in the absolute stillness), but a fragment shattered Captain Besch's arm ten meters away, Corporal Reed died of his wounds about an hour later (according to SSGT Frye, who was on the other radio. Corporal Reed said, "I'm getting weak now," and signed off). Corporal Reed was awarded posthumously the Silver Star for this action. (He deserved the Navy Cross or Medal of Honor, I believe.)

Ref: p. 100, 4th para, "The relief force once again... (This whole para, confuses me. The Company F platoon reached my vicinity at possibly 0100 and was driven off by grenades; this was followed by the enemy setting up the machine gun a "little" (15 minutes?0 later, followed by SSGT Frye destroying it with 106mm fire just after it was set up. The platoon commander/SSGT Frye was with me 15 meters "below the mouth of (one of) the cave(s), not 50 meters away. I don't remember any enemy fire which "prevented the linkup of the two Marine platoons." nor their repulsing several NVA attempts to "overrun" them. I suggest deleting this paragraph entirely and using the following one.)

By dawn on the 24th, the reinforced relief group had positioned itself on a finger of the Razorback overlooking the caves, about 30 meters behind Captain Besch's group of survivor's. About 0600, a NVA force came out of the caves and formed for an assault. Simultaneously, the Marine relief group and the enemy opened fire, but the latter, now in the open, were very quickly (with seconds, like turning down a radio volume button, as Captain Besch noted at the time) annihilated by the Marines, one of whom shouted, "One of 'em is still moving, SSGT Frye shouted, shoot the son-of-a-bitch," and nearly every Marine reopened fire (according to Captain Besch, who was in-between the fires). At about 1000, air strikes with bombs and napalm were directed against the caves:

Captain Besch asked battalion to call them off, but not before burning fragments struck his helmet and wounded several Marines in the relief group. Finally, at about 1100, a Navy corpsman arrived and treated Captain Besch and the survivors with him, but shortly thereafter, the relief group received mortar and small arms fire (the corpsman told me to go back, so he could treat the wounded under me, as there was not other cover from the enemy remaining in the caves. Dazed, I tried to confer with Captain Moore, Company F, of the relief force. SSGT Frye had to drag me away as an incoming mortar burst less than 5 yds away. SSGT Frye would not give up and continued to fight like hell and with all he had. SSGT Frye helped me walk about a mile toward the battalion OP before I collapsed from loss of blood and exhaustion. A medevac helicopter spotted SSGT Frye and myself and landed; being unable to exert myself further and knowing many others also needed attention, I consented to being evacuated.)

Ref: p. 100, 4th para. (I believe the "two battered platoons late that afternoon" refer to E Company, which had been rescued by noon (see attachment b); perhaps this sentence should be deleted. (According to S-3, it took 4 days to locate Corporal Reed's body, which had been buried under debris.

Re: last para. on p. 100, continued on p. 101.

(Company E Casualties were, according to S-3, 11 killed, two mortally wounded. Corporal Reed, who succumbed after the 106mm destruction of the enemy machine gun, was one, and about 15 wounded of the estimated 30 men in the forward element, leaving only four able to walk away or wounded. There were none in the rear element as far as I know. LTC Bench wrote me that 37 enemy bodies were found and that there were an estimated 100 more "probables" (see attachment). The number of enemy casualties and the fact that most of them had been carried away, as well as the use of 12.7mm MGs indicates that Company E had confronted major elements of a NVA battalion with only two squads and headquarters elements and from a very disadvantageous position. It is not remarkable that we were overrun; it is remarkable that no Marine surrendered or